

AN APPEAL ON BEHALF OF A FRIEND UNFAIRLY TREATED

A free pamphlet on the Elspeth King debate
and an appeal by Alasdair Gray

PEOPLE trying to write true accounts (instead of entertaining stories) should first say who they are and what led them to write. I am a 55-year old Glaswegian who trained at Glasgow Art School and afterwards worked at illustrations, mural decorations, portraits and landscapes. I liked representing the people and surroundings I knew, and my work became known to people in my native city who visited galleries, though not much known elsewhere. I subsidized my art work with part-time writing. In the spring of 1977 I was phoned by Elspeth King of Glasgow's local history museum, in the People's Palace, Glasgow Green. She asked if I would like a steady job as Glasgow's first artist-recorder. Indeed I would.

The job of artist-recorder had been invented by Elspeth, and is an example of how she solved problems thought insoluble by former People's Palace curators. Since the First World War our local history museum had received no funds to buy new artifacts or paintings. It was funded through Kelvingrove Gallery and Museum, which had to pay the huge price of storing and conserving the Burrell Collection, so most of Glasgow's 20th century and much of its late 19th century life was not represented. But the Government had now started a Job Creation scheme to reduce unemployment, a scheme which would pay the first three months' wages of any worthy new job an employer proposed. On a 9 o'clock to 5 basis I made portraits of modern Glaswegians (some typical, some famous) in surroundings of their own choice, and painted cityscapes of buildings and streets soon to be destroyed or transformed. In return I had a steady income, a studio in a well-lit part of the People's Palace store, and a future for my work in a public collection.

The job also brought me companionship. The store was where Mike Donnelly, Elspeth's helper, assembled and cleaned stained-glass windows, ceramic panels, posters and documents he had salvaged from

buildings scheduled for demolition. At that time a lot of Glasgow was being demolished. Elspeth sometimes gave Michael manual help with his salvage work, as none of their staff was paid to retrieve things from dirty, unsafe buildings. Neither, of course, were Mike and Elspeth, but being the only keepers of Glasgow's local culture they felt bound to do it. The things they salvaged were the core of important exhibitions, exhibitions they set up at astonishingly low cost to the rate payer, as they had done nearly all the basic handwork and headwork themselves.

The store was where some of the staff had their coffee breaks, so of course I heard about the Palace and its problems: dry rot in the main structure, and leaky panes in the winter garden conservatory. The first part was administered by Kelvingrove Museum, the second by Glasgow Parks department. These made decisions without consulting Elspeth King who did not officially exist for them. She had come to the Palace in 1974 to assist the former curator, Robert Wilkie. When he retired she had inherited his job, not his title, so was never asked to official meetings discussing the Palace's condition or future. Newspaper reports indicated that the District Council were discussing a motorway through Glasgow Green which might leave the Palace awkwardly isolated. They also discussed a proposal to knock the local history museum down and put its contents in store until a better container could be made. One councillor suggested the People's Palace was in bad hands because a display of Glasgow stage comedy material showed Billy Connolly's comic welly boots – perhaps the councillor thought Harry Lauder's comic walking-sticks were devalued by the proximity. All this news disturbed Elspeth King, who was told nothing directly. She felt the Palace was in danger. She and Mike Donnelly identified with it and worked to save it by increasing the value of the exhibitions and making the place popular. They succeeded. Though a small local history museum it is now the fifth best attended in Scotland after Edinburgh Castle, The Burrell Collection, the Scottish National Museum and Kelvingrove.

In September 1977 I stopped being artist-recorder to become resident writer in Glasgow University and my regular connection with those who ran the Palace ended as suddenly as it started. I no longer worried how Elspeth and Michael were managing, because news items and occasional visits to their museum showed they were doing

well. I will summarize their achievements very briefly.

In 12 years she and her small staff put on 41 special exhibitions, most of it achieved through work with local communities, local sports and photographic clubs, local artists and local labour. Yet the People's Palace won the European Museum of the Year Award in 1981, the British Museum of the Year Award in 1983, and was a main feature in 7 networked television films. In 1987 when Ken Curry had become one of an internationally known group of new Glasgow painters he painted a history of Scottish working life on eight panels round the inside of the People's Palace dome, the biggest mural commission for a Glasgow public building since the decoration of the City Chambers banqueting hall almost a century earlier. Elspeth helped make other local history museums in Rutherglen Park and Provands Lordship, but the establishment of Springburn local history museum was perhaps her biggest outside effort. The curator of it, Mark O'Neill, was chosen on Elspeth King's advice.

But her main achievement was in the organization of the Palace's permanent exhibition. When she took over it had all the interest of a gigantic lumber-room full of objects too fascinating to throw away but which no other public places could use: James Watt's pipe organ, Lister's carbolic spray, a regimental snuff-box made from a ram's head. These objects were not presented in a way which gave a continuous idea of Glasgow's history. By 1990 Elspeth had designed and set up a display that indicated the flow of Glasgow life from its religious, trading and industrial foundation to more recent times, and still she was not an official curator, but deputy to one who did not exist.

In the year when Glasgow became the (official) European Capital of Culture its council advertised a new job: Keeper of Glasgow's Social History, to control all Glasgow's local history museums, but especially "the very popular People's Palace." Responsible for the appointment was Mr Spalding, the new head of Glasgow's museum service. When asked if Ms King would not get the job automatically he said, "No jobs for the girls. We must be democrats and make jobs open to all." He appointed the keeper of the new little Springburn museum. This shocked Glaswegians who thought his choice was not democratic. If democracy means choosing someone popular and liked, not even Mr Spalding, not even the keeper of the Burrell Collection, is more popular

than Elspeth King, and if mere achievements are a qualification nobody *can* be better qualified than she.

The stramash this caused in Glasgow's local government and press shows why after 14 years she is now deputy of a young man she once promoted. Though a member of no party she is keen on working-class life and history and a true Scottish radical. She dislikes the sale of public property to private companies, and the leaders of the district council wish to sell Glasgow Green near the Palace to English companies who will turn it into a vast commercial leisure centre. Also, Elspeth is supported by very peculiar people: local poets, playwrights, novelists, anarchists, socialists (real ones), Tories (Scotland still has Tories), and 21 Labour councillors who have been threatened by the withdrawal of the Labour party whip if they speak to the press on this matter. It is clear that Elspeth King has no political sense at all.

Hooray for hard-working public servants who give the public a better service than they expect, and have no political sense. Our country is rotten with the other sort.

THE APPEAL

In the public debate over this affair some highly placed folk have made statements damaging to Elspeth King's professional standing and career. As a junior official, she will be sacked if she speaks publicly in her own defence, but has the right to defend herself legally. This will involve her in Court expenses, and while defending her reputation, may lose her money. I have opened an account called *The E. King Legal Defence Fund*. in the Byres Road branch of the Royal Bank of Scotland, and with some others who wish her well have put money in it. The fund is headed by Janey Buchan, Euro-MP; David Kemp, journalist; and me. If you will help Elspeth by adding to it, please make out a cheque/postal order to *The E. King Legal Defence Fund* and post to
A. McAllister LLB., 23 Highburgh Road, Glasgow G12.

Your contribution will be acknowledged, banked, and returned if Court costs are less than the £900 the Fund already contains.

A shortened version of this essay was written for *The Independent Magazine*.

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